

Masthead Logo

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# Comment

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## Comment by the Editor

### WHAT'S IN AN INDEX

Consider the *Congressional Record*. Such a labyrinth of arguments and motions, points of order, leaves to print, private bills, petitions signed by one and sundry others, special orders, morning hours, the Union calendar, yeas and nays, extensions of remarks, unanimous consent, committee meetings, and amendments to amendments could never be explored successfully without a guide to names and public problems. To find a thought within ten thousand pages full of six-point type would be a task to test the perseverance of Ulysses, unless the Congressmen's ideas were catalogued. All things may well be counted lost which, being locked in multitudinous confusion, possess no key to turn the bolt of orderly arrangement. Certainly no volume is so brief or simple that it can not be improved by a program of its contents.

Perhaps the work of Congress may be typical. What phase of human achievement does not need a guide to indicate its meaning and design? Without an index, even commonplace activities would be difficult indeed. The tourist watches for the highway numbers; the mariner scans his compass; the pilot reads the surface of the water; and the woodsman finds his way by the position of the sun or the mossy sides of trees.



All are indices of place. The weather-vane points at the wind; longitude and latitude constitute the exact index to everywhere; a calendar is merely a table of days arranged in weeks and months and years by which we measure time; the gnomon of a sundial marks the fleeting span of daylight.

But indexes are not confined to books and means of telling time or finding places. Habits, opinions, appearance, and associates are useful guides to human character. He who played backgammon in Arabia could not testify in court. A man is known by the company he keeps. The palmist tries to reconstruct a stranger's life from the evidence that his hand reveals, while John Hancock's signature has become the symbol of a bold and enterprising man. A person's countenance is an open index to his mind, reflecting there in smiling lips or flashing eyes his inmost thoughts and feelings. According to the legend, Ernest assimilated character from gazing at the Great Stone Face.

The world, it seems, is fully indexed. What has been done, if viewed in orderly perspective, explains the present state of being and points the way to future conduct. Selection and arrangement of significant events makes history an instrument of cosmos. In such a sense the PALIMPSEST itself is something of an index to the history of Iowa — always incomplete perhaps, yet serving as a partial guide to past events, historic spots, and not-forgotten people.

J. E. B.